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Toward a Third Podcasting: Activist Podcasting in an Age of Social Justice Capitalism

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Cover Page Footnote


By Jess Shane, with support from James T. Green and CC Paschal

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TOWARD A THIRD PODCASTING

Activist podcasting in an age of social justice capitalism

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Revolutionary cinema is not fundamentally one which illustrates, documents, or passively establishes a situation: rather, it attempts to intervene in the situation as an element providing thrust or rectification.

— Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, *Toward a Third Cinema*

Dear comrades in sonic storytelling,

You are well aware that the podcast landscape has changed, is changing and fast. What was once a niche and decentralised landscape—audio blogs, narrative radio shows, and transmission arts programs by independent creators—has conglomerated into an increasingly-centralised content mill financed by entertainment and tech venture capital on a mission for cheap IP and seas of open ears. The doors to Hollywood have swung open, and big-name festivals are now welcoming podcast submissions from any network willing to foot the bill of entry. But are these the doors we should be walking through? Are there other doors?

At this juncture in podcasting's 'Hollywoodification', I propose a term and framework for mapping the new podcast landscape: Third Podcasting. It is inspired by the Third Cinema movement in film history which classifies films into three broad categories: First Cinema refers to the blockbuster Hollywood machine, concerned with mass entertainment and high profit margins; Second Cinema describes formally-experimental auteur and art house films, whose marketplace and modes of distribution run parallel to or overlap with systems of mainstream thought and capital; and Third Cinema, which cannot be digested by the market, as it is a tool for anti-capitalist and socialist revolution.

Of course, podcasting is a recent medium with a different history from film. To attempt to map Third Cinema onto podcasting requires a massaging of definitions, particularly given podcasting's roots in radio journalism rather than entertainment. I suggest, then, that first podcasting refers to established shows from legacy media outlets, backed by public and nonprofit funding. Such shows promise to both educate and entertain within the gilded frame of journalistic neutrality. Second podcasting, then, like arthouse cinema, is marked by an influx of 'auteur' shows, host-driven formats including memoir, quest narratives, and arts and culture deep dives. Often backed by private companies with more flexible editorial policies, second podcasts prioritise aesthetics and pleasure, experiment with format and tone and extend the grammar of their first podcasting forebears.

Yet in the wake of 2020's cocktail of racial reckoning and pandemic-induced introspection, many media organisations across North America have pivoted to cater to an audience allegedly ready to "speak truth to power". It seems that no matter the locus of funding, social-justice-minded podcasts are now mainstays at every major network. Meanwhile, the centralised distribution platforms make distinguishing between shows produced by public

broadcasters, corporations and revolutionaries more challenging. In this crowded and liberal media landscape, is there a Third Podcasting movement?

I believe there is. But since these shows do not prioritise topping the podcast charts, I will attempt to name their qualities so that their impact can grow. In this moment of corporate takeover, when podcasting is homogenising, outputting narrative shows insidiously tailored to cater to the needs of both audiences needy for distraction and advertisers greedy for clicks, the time is NOW for the rise of the third podcast.

Presenting the Third Podcasting Manifesto:

YOU, anti-capitalist producer, trapped within the fortress of corporate and institutional funding;

YOU, who entered this field in pursuit of intervention, insurrection and community-building yet find yourself underwhelmed;

IT IS TIME to seize the means of production, to transform our capacity for creating and assessing the leftist podcast.

IT IS POSSIBLE to radicalise the private space between the ears.

The third podcaster shouts

NO to the farce of journalistic neutrality.

YES to the dissolution of the line between subject and maker!

NO to shining a light on politics without being political.

YES to each episode as a provocation!

NO to resistance solely at the level of aesthetics.

YES to socialist calls to action!

The third podcast is uninterested in corporate metrics of audience size, clicks, profits, and awards.

NO to the market dictating show content, format, and tone.

YES to building local capacity over general interest!

NO to liberal critiques softened for widespread palatability.

YES to aggressive stances to deepen conversation!

NO to the promo masquerading as review or critique.

YES to innovating new models for distribution including member-run co-ops, organising collectives, word-of-mouth and listening gatherings by and for front-line communities for processing and debate!

Third Podcasting is scornful of hierarchical production models. Production infrastructure and process are inextricable from a show's political salience.

NO to the host-as-figurehead.

YES to editorial collectives and group authorship.

NO to inflexible schedules to meet corporate demands.

YES to slowness and comprehensiveness—taking time needed to stand firmly behind your work!

NO to editorial censorship of radical positions.

YES to seeking alternative funding structures including crowd-funding, academic grants or donors with no clause of editorial sign-off!

The third podcast is sceptical of the award-winning formula of pressing social issue + commercial narrative form = commercial hit.

TURN AWAY from formulas of structure that makes your episodes sound and feel like mainstream fiction films.

DOWN WITH THE DRIVEWAY MOMENT, the lucrative beckons of the hero's journey, the digestible version of reality taught through conclusions of reconciliation or catharsis.

CAST OFF stories propelled by symptoms of individual traumas rather than critiques of their source!

DISCOVER what is possible when form follows function rather than the other way around.

JOLT the listener wherever possible with formal agnosticism, hybrid forms and possibilities for alienation!

FIGHT bourgeois ideology and the economic system that underpins it with anti-status quo aesthetics!

CELEBRATE formlessness, process, multiplicity, ambiguity, abstraction, duration and chaos, so as to cast your listener as co-creator rather than consumer!

And IF they can be consumed, let them cause explosive indigestion.

The third podcast rejects the passive listening industrial complex. There is a direct correlation between the podcast as entertainment-based distraction, and our inability to attend to and organise with each other. The listening experience must become an encounter between maker and listener.

NO to distributing the pleasure of thought without propelling thinking for oneself.

YES to pedagogical discomfort!

NO to didacticism and handholding through complex ideas.

YES to breaking the fourth wall and speaking to people, not about them!

NO to both-sides-ism and explanatory commas.

YES to presenting bold counter-narratives in isolation from their mainstream counterparts!

YES to the listening event geared towards unstructured conversation and debate.

YES to upholding that the podcast is unfinished until it encounters receptive ears and feeds conversation geared to action.

THE FEED ONLY FEEDS if it energizes organising outside of its privately resounding waveforms.

Comrade audio producers,

Recognise that the notion of categorising podcasts is inherently imperfect, incomplete and unstable; that the concept of Third Podcasting is a tool for strategy and analysis of the political salience of any given project. You may, and likely will, find yourself working within corporate or commercial limits. It is possible to pull from, innovate and sublimate the provocations of Third Podcasting as best you can. There are no universal norms for liberation.

I leave you with this message from Third Cinema founders Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, shared in the voiceover of their 1968 proof-of-concept film, *La Hora de los Hornos*:

The conclusions [...] at which you may arrive as the real authors and protagonists of this history are important. The experiences and conclusions that I have assembled have a relative worth; they are of use to the extent that they are useful to you, who are the present and future of liberation. But most important of all is the action that may arise from these conclusions, the unity on the basis of the facts. This is why the film stops here; it opens out to you so that you can continue it.

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Jess Shane is a Canadian artist, audio documentarian and educator. Her work explores ethics and power dynamics traditionally upheld in documentary production. Jess is currently in production on a limited-run podcast series for Radiotopia Presents. She has presented both audio and film shorts at festivals including Prismatic Ground, DOCNYC, Open City Documentary Festival, New Orleans Film Festival, Third Horizon Film Festival, Hearsay and the International Features Conference, and worked on podcasts with clients including the MoMA, TED, NBC, the CBC and the BBC. She is the co-founder of the independent sound art podcast and collective, *Constellations*, a home for sound art from makers internationally.